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Theatre Critics' Reviews
1955

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Theatre Openings
"Damn Yankees"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of May 9, 1955*

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
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NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
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"Damn Yankees"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

May 6, 1955

THEATER

'Damn Yankees'

By WALTER F. KERR

"DAMN YANKEES" is a musical comedy about a passionate baseball fan who sells his soul to the Devil so that his favorite team can whip the New York Yankees, and offhand I'd say that one of the neatest tricks of anybody's season would be to bring off a fantasy about Hell and baseball. The funny thing about the show at the 46th Street is that it does the toughest things best.

It has, to begin with, two friendly fiends from the underside of the Stadium. One of them is Ray Walston, diffidently hiking his trousers to reveal livid red socks as he strolls onto a neighborhood porch and makes his pennant-winning proposition. Mr. Walston is dandy. Gone is the coyness that generally crops up whenever an actor finds himself lifting a Satanic eyebrow. This devil has no time for archness: he is brisk, businesslike, inclined to fidget when things aren't hustling along. And he has a fine assortment of very reasonable emotions: resignation ("I'm overworked"), disdain ("That's gauche"), and utter outrage at the thought of wasting good money on unnecessary disguises. I think it may have been a mistake to ask Mr. Walston to sing in addition to his other, silkily managed, chores, but a few flat notes here and there don't really diminish a very tasty performance.

While we are on the subject of tastiness, Gwen Verdon is practically in a league of her own. Miss Verdon is the more attractive visitor from over the fence (she has red hair, needing no further identification) and her task is to see that the hard-hitting hero is so titillated while under the devil's management that he will give no thought to welching on the deal.

This saucy siren performs her mission so well that it is at all times difficult to believe that baritone Stephen Douglass is actually pining away for the homebody of a wife he left behind him. Miss Verdon is, I believe, some sort of a mobile designed by a man without a conscience. As she prances mockingly through a seduction scene, flipping a black glove over her shoulder as her hips go into mysterious but extremely interesting action, beating the floor idiotically with whatever clothing she has removed, coiling all over a locker-room bench while batting absurd eyelashes at her terrified victim, she is simply and insanely inspired. Elsewhere —in a leftfield ratrace called "Who's Got the Pain?" in a baby-talk bit about her brains and her talent, in a rueful little duet labeled "Two Lost Souls"— she is everything undesirable made absolutely and forever desirable.

"Damn Yankees" gets past second base on some other counts. Every time the male chorus turns front and hurls a Richard Adler-Jerry Ross showtune at the customers, the back walls bend a little. ("Heart," "Shoeless Joe," and "The Game" are blockbusters, in the best George Abbott tradition). Every time Nathaniel Frey, as a shyly boisterous member of the Washington Senators, pops his eyes, burns with resentment, or turns a noble profile to the wings, the humor of the evening increases. Russ Brown, Shannon Bolin, Jimmie Komack, and Rae Allen whip in and out helpfully, the William and Jean Eckart settings are perfect, the George Abbott pace is as lively as anyone could ask.

But a glance at the scoreboard still leaves things in an unsettled state. The adventurous book, based on a Douglas Wallop novel, gets over its initial hurdles beautifully, then strays after odds and ends of plot that turn out to have relatively little laughter in them. The humor occasionally must work so hard as to introduce Miss Verdon as "Senorita Lola Cabana." The ballad lyrics are pretty straight-faced affairs, and the authors seem terribly fond of a couplet that runs something like "A man doesn't know what he has till he loses it, when a man has the love of a woman he abuses it" (the number is reprised three times). The score, apart from the roistering hymns handed the chorus, is never much more than serviceable.

In short, "Damn Yankees" has an appealing idea, a couple of first-rate performers, and an intermittent flair for raising the roof. What it hasn't got is staying power, a knack for hanging onto its gains and snowballing them into hilarity.

"DAMN YANKEES"

Musical comedy based on Douglass Wallop's novel "The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant;" book by George Abbott and Mr. Wallop; music and lyrics by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross; directed by Mr. Abbott; dances and musical numbers staged by Bob Fosse; scenery and costumes designed by William and Jean Eckart; musical direction by Hal Hastings; orchestrations by Don Walker; presented by Frederick Brisson, Robert E. Griffith and Harold S. Prince in association with Albert D. Taylor at the 46th Street Theatre, May 5, 1955. The cast:

Meg	Shannon Bolin
Joe Boyd	Robert Shafer
Applegate	Ray Walston
Sister	Jean Stapleton
Doris	Elizabeth Howell
Joe Hardy	Stephen Douglass
Henry	Al Lanti
Sohovik	Eddie Phillips
Smokey	Nathaniel Frey
Vernon	Albert Linville
Van Buren	Russ Brown
Rocky	Jimmie Komack
Gloria	Rae Allen
Teen-Ager	Cherry Davis
Lynch	Del Horstmann
Welch	Richard Bishop
Lola	Gwen Verdon
Miss Weston	Janie Janvier
Guard	George Marcy

Journal American

May 6, 1955

This Musical Tremendous!

Brilliant Song and Dancer Breathes Punch and Polish by George Abbott

By JOHN McCLAIN

WELL, THIS IS IT—a truly tremendous musical. George Abbott, with a notable assist from Douglass Wallop (author of the novel from which it was fashioned), has brought in a brilliant song-and-dancer which should last as long as Gwen Verdon. And judging from the shape she was in last night that should be forever.

"Damn Yankees," which premiered at the Forty-sixth St. Theatre, is a jubilant combination of the town's best talents. Dr. Abbott has provided the punch, pace and polish for which he's famous; Gwen Verdon has never been given more magnificent material or complimentary costumes and she takes full advantage of both; Stephen Douglass and Ray Walston give her generous support; the score by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross is certainly ingenious if not inspired; the scenery and costumes by William and Jean Eckart are exceptional and original, and Bob Fosse has had a complete field day in building his choreography around a baseball background.

It could not have been an off-hand task to develop a musical comedy plot from the rather complicated notion of Mr. Wallop's novel. The devil, in the form of Ray Walston, decides to pluck a sedentary baseball fan away from his television screen and make him the greatest rookie in the world. Thus Stephen Douglass is reduced in years and given a berth with the Washington Senators.

Devilish Plan

It is then Mephisto's plan to permit the fledgling to reach the heights, only to be brought down by his disciple, Gwen Verdon, in the critical pennant race with the Yankees. I won't tell you how this works out.

The tale is told with an almost incredible dedication to the national pastime: the chorus gentlemen actually look like ball players; the manager, played to the hilt by Russ Brown, is as tough and truculent as Durocher; and the dance numbers involving the boys are as legit as possible short of spiked shoes. The big number in the first act, "Shoeless Joe from Hannibal, Mo" ends with the lads hitting the dirt toward the footlights, and last night it received an ovation.

Gwen Verdon will fracture you with "Whatever Lola Wants." She makes a belated appearance in the proceedings, but once she's arrived there's no question about who's in charge. This is followed after a polite interval by "Who's Got the Pain," a josh at the Mambo, and in the second act, "Two Lost Souls," with Stephen Douglass, which not only tied up the show but also the traffic on Forty-sixth St. This girl can sing and dance like a dream; she is extremely pretty and has a figure like a Florentine fountain.

Other plaudits should be accorded Shannon Bolin, Jimmie Komack, Nathaniel Frey, Richard Bishop, Jean Stapleton, Rae Allen and Robert Shafer.

As in any such obviously inspirational effort there are many moments of sheer emotional impact. I found myself wiping a tear from my eye when Douglass played a scene with Miss Bolin, the wife he deserted for his career in the majors. This is skillful make-believing.

"Damn Yankees" is one of the real big ones of the season; it will be easier to get into the World Series, no matter who wins.

Daily Mirror

May 6, 1955

'Damn Yankees' Headed For a Sockeroo Hit!

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The team of Robert E. Griffith, Harold S. Prince and Frederick Brisson continued its phenomenal winning streak Thursday night at the Forty-Sixth Street Theatre. The big hit boys hammered out another homer with "Damn Yankees." The first four-bagger was merely "Pajama Game."

THE NEW song-and-dance sockeroo has a clever book by George Abbott and Douglass Wallop, based on the latter's novel, "The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant." With a vastly enjoyable and breezy touch, it mates the perennial "Faust" legend and baseball. Mephistopheles walks into the home of an aging Washington Senators rooter, and restores his youth for a price.

He will have a chance to lead his favorite team to a pennant by a certain day, and if he doesn't make the deadline—well, you know what always happens. But as to what really happens in this instance, we're not going to tell you. You'll have to find out for yourself and have a whale of a good time doing it.

Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, who supplied the click songs for "Pajama Game," have come up with some more juke-box dillies for this one. We never saw Babe Ruth or Lou Gehrig, if "Whatever Lola Wants" doesn't chase "Hernando's Hideaway" off the nickel-snatchers in the local bistros. As for the others, you'll have to make you own picks and set your own odds.

REMEMBER Gwen Verdon? The sexy siren in "Can-Can's" Garden of Eden? She was terrific in that one. Now she's titanic as devilish Delilah bent on luring weak-willed wallopers to their destruction. The town's newest dynamic darling! In the good old days, they'd have been sipping champagne out of her slippers in the cabarets. Now the gay blades will just have to be content blistering their palms applauding.

Stephen Douglass, to whom we probably gave his initial Main Stem notice a while back, is perfect as the former sandlotter transformed into a superman of the diamond. He's got the "built," as Dan Parker puts it, the looks and the voice. A real Joe DiMaggio type.

Ray Walston is as smooth as they come as the Satanic slicker. He has real bite and style as the cosmic wise-guy who always tries to stack the cards in his own favor. Russ Brown, a solid, veteran trouper, struck a delightfully nostalgic note for us as the Senators' harassed manager. Wonder if he remembers the fabulous era when Fallon & Brown, Winchell & Green, used to be featured on the same vaudeville bills? And we do mean the Mirror's W.W.

AN ONRUSHING deadline prevents our awarding further individual citations, so we're going to tender a unit award for merit to the entire cast. Bob Fosse has arranged ensembles that further the action, while William and Jean Eckart have designed sets and costumes that are accurate.

Baseball is the great national pastime, and we predict that "Damn Yankees" will become a great national entertainment. It's packed with power all down the line, from lead-off man to the pitcher. There isn't a weak spot in the lineup. Here's a pennant winner if we ever saw one. A real champ!

New York Post

May 6, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

When Satan Took Over Baseball

Possibly the news of "Damn Yankees," the musical comedy which opened last night at the 46th St. Theater, is that it seems to have conquered the long-standing jinx dooming to failure all efforts to portray baseball on the stage. But I would say that the chief reason for enthusiasm over the evening's proceedings is that Gwen Verdon, who was merely sensational in "Can-Can" several seasons ago, is even more completely wonderful in her second leading role on Broadway. For "Damn Yankees" has a way of faltering from time to time, but Miss Verdon is unfailing.

The new show has been adapted by George Abbott and Douglass Wallop from a novel by Mr. Wallop called "The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant," which, as every baseball fan appears to know, dealt with a passionate but elderly Washington fan who sold his soul to the Devil for the right to win the American League race for his beloved Senators virtually singlehanded. I suppose the really ardent addicts of the game will regard the poor fellow as a sissy for returning to his wife rather than accepting the Devil's permission to go on and win the World Series, too.

The Faustian conception applied to baseball is obviously a fresh and amusing one for a musical comedy, and, to a considerable extent, the authors have taken proper advantage of it. Almost all of their first act is consistently entertaining. It seems, however, that, having got hold of a good idea and toyed with it agreeably for a while, they weren't quite sure how to carry it out with consistent imagination to the end, and the second act of "Damn Yankees," which is fortunately the shorter one, runs down, I think, rather helplessly.

One reason is that, in a fashion that is virtually inevitable in shows dealing with the conflict between Good and Evil, the representatives of the Devil turn out to be far the better company. In "Damn Yankees," Satan is an extremely engaging fellow in the person of Ray Walston, an admirably casual actor, and, when he calls in a wicked lady to aid him in his schemes and the lady proves to be the handsome, humorous and delightful Miss Verdon, triumphant virtue seems extremely dull. I even admired her when the plot forced her to reform sacrificially in the second act.

It is fortunate for "Damn Yankees" that, when its baseball story tends to fall apart, Miss Verdon and Mr. Walston are on hand. He is always excellent and comforting, but this is her show. A brilliant dancer and that rare sort of comedienne who can be funny without losing her attractiveness, Miss Verdon seems able to do everything delightfully, and she is particularly fascinating when attempting hilariously to seduce the upright ball player and in a splendid Latin dancing number with Eddie Phillips. She is certainly more important than baseball to the show.

The score by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross has one especially good song called "Heart" and is, in general, pleasant. Bob Fosse has staged some effective dance numbers, Mr. Abbott has kept the show moving along with zest, the sets by the Eckarts are attractive, Stephen Douglass is agreeable as the Faustian ball player (he's played by Robert Shafer when he's the elderly fan, a switch in characterizations that bothered me a little) and the others manage to enact ball players without seeming absurd. But it's Miss Verdon who makes "Damn Yankees" a good show.

The New York Times

May 6, 1955

Theatre: The Devil Seeks a Soul

'Damn Yankees' Is a Baseball Musical

By LEWIS FUNKE

As shiny as a new baseball and almost as smooth, a new musical glorifying the national pastime slid into the Forty-sixth Street Theatre last night. As far as this umpire is concerned you can count it among the healthy clouts of the campaign.

It is called "Damned Yankees" and it tells about how Casey Stengel's stalwarts are brought down to defeat by the Washington Senators in the final game of the season with the American League bunting the prize. But even the most ardent supporters of Casey Stengel's minions should have a good time. And, as for that Dodgers crowd, well you can just imagine.

Heading the board of strategy for this outfit is that shrewd manipulator of talent, George Abbott. He acts as general manager of the proceedings on the stage in addition to having collaborated on the book with Douglass Wallop, from whose novel, "The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant," this merry romp was taken.

To be sure, like any other manager in the course of a long season, Mr. Abbott has not been able to iron out all the kinks in his combination. In spite of his emphasis on speed afoot and timing there is a tendency every now and then for things to settle down a bit flatly on the ground. But the story of how Joe Boyd leases his soul to the devil in order to become Joe Hardy, champion home-run hitter and inspiration of the Washington Senators, succeeds in being a sufficiently satisfactory vehicle on which to hang some highly amusing antics and utilize some splendid performances.

There is for instance that enchantress, Gwen Verdon, who socked a home run two years ago in "Can-Can." Miss Verdon is the devil's handmaiden called upon to aid in sealing the fate of Joe Hardy's soul. It is difficult to understand how Joe was able to hold out for so long. For Miss Verdon is just about as alluring a she-witch as was ever bred in the nether regions. Vivacious, as sleek as a car on the showroom floor, and as nice to look at, she gives brilliance and sparkle to the evening with her exuberant dancing, her wicked, glistening eyes and her sheer delight in the foolery.

For the Devil there is the impeccable Ray Walston, a suave and sinister fellow who knows how to be disdainful of the good in man, whose pleasure, as you might expect, is to make humans squirm. Authoritative and persuasive, he does not overdo a role that